

the boats darted about like swallows and made impossibly sharp turns across one another's bow. Their daredevil crews—"great unshaved, gigantic-chested beings, with eyes as clear as coals," "eyes of hawks, piercing and sharp"—took poses like Greek statues as they cast out their trolling lines and hauled them in again with a flourish; they stripped the fish off and piled them into the boats as fast as a lightning compositor setting type. These heroes lived on fish, salt pork, potatoes and rum, worked for days half naked and up to their waists in water, and at night slept soundly on beds of furled sails and marsh hay. In imagination he became one with them:

. . . trailing for blue-fish off Paumanok, I stand with braced body,
My left foot is on the gunwhale, my right arm throws far out the
coils of slender rope,
In sight round me the quick veering and darting of fifty skiffs, my
companions.

He declined to sentimentalize life in the country districts—"In *proportion*, there is as much wickedness in country as in towns," and probably more misery. Isolation and a hard struggle for existence nurtured avarice, "barbarous" ignorance, alcoholism, drug addiction, and a strange sort of egotism. Old people lived like hermits, and when they died their cottages stood deserted, except for a cat gone wild that prowled under the floor boards. "The country child is put to hard work at an early age," he wrote, recalling his own aversion to farming:

he soon loses the elasticity of youth, and becomes round-shouldered and clumsy. He learns to smoke, chew, and drink, about as soon as his town prototype. The diet of country people is generally abominable: pork and grease, doughy bread, and other equally indigestible dishes, form a large portion of their food. They work very much too hard, and put too heavy labors upon the youthful ones. The excessive fatigue of a hurried harvest, in the hottest season of the year, thoroughly breaks the constitution of many a boy and young man. . . . no matter what moralists and metaphysicians may teach, out of cities the human race does not expand and improvise so well morally, intellectually, or physically.

Seeking "perfect pictures," pictures "copious and inimitable," he found them more readily in libraries and art galleries and when he